

## Stop Coping, Start Living

By Tony Stoltzfus

Half-way through the coaching session we hit a wall. Brad's goal was to finish his second book, but after three months work and numerous interruptions, he'd only completed two chapters. "Talk to me about your writing process," I inquired. "Just walk through your writing time for a day this week and tell me exactly what you did."



As Brad broke down several typical days, it became clear why he wasn't making much progress. We found that in a three hour session he spent two and a half hours on average reviewing and agonizing over the previous day's work, and only 20 minutes creating anything new. "I've always been a bit of a perfectionist," Brad offered. "I look at it the next day and think, 'I'll just take a few minutes and clean up some minor details,' and then I end up editing for a couple hours. I guess I need to work on managing my time a little better."

My next questions stopped Brad in his tracks. "What if instead of coming up with a strategy to manage around your perfectionism, you set out to eliminate it altogether? Image a life where that was gone. What would that look like if you stopped coping with getting it right and were able to just write?"

### Tolerating the Little Things

Most coaches are familiar with how little tolerations in life can add up to big energy drains. We all tend to get in the habit of tolerating small annoyances, when if we really took notice of those things, we could change them for the better. A common coaching exercise is to create a list of all the little things in one's home or office or schedule that bother us, and to start eliminating them one by one.

For instance, I remember living for two years with a refrigerator door that didn't close automatically. Every time the kids got into the fridge, the door got left standing open. After several dozen little conflicts, it finally occurred to me one day that all I had to do

was block up the front corner of the fridge about a half an inch and the door would shut itself. Three minutes to solve the problem—why didn't I think of that months ago???

In this kind of example, tolerations are minor annoyances we could easily change if we only stopped and noticed how much they bug us. Coaching questions around tolerations might sound like this:

- *"Name three little annoyances in life that steal your energy or rob your joy?"*
- *"Close your eyes and imagine walking through your house, room by room. What in that room takes energy to look at? What needs or unfinished tasks do you see? What in that room do you want to change that you just haven't gotten to?"*
- *"What possessions that you no longer need are cluttering up your life?"*
- *"What worries clutter up your mind that you could let go of today?"*

### **Coping with the Big Things**

This same coping pattern comes into play with bigger issues—and that's where the real coaching pay dirt is. Brad was tolerating his perfectionism because he accepted it as a normal part of the way he functioned. When I asked him to visualize a life without it, he was at a loss—it was a totally new thought. In the same way that we cope with minor annoyances by managing around them, we tend to ignore larger character issues and try to manage our lives to minimize the impact of our own brokenness.

One of the most common areas where I see this happen with leaders is healing issues. One man knows his parent's divorce is still affecting the way he relates to his wife. But instead of going to prayer counseling or Theophostics and getting some help, he tries to manage his fear of intimacy and abandonment in a daily internal thought-control battle that saps his creative energy. Or a businesswoman knows deep down that her need for self-sufficiency is the real reason she is too busy, but instead of dealing with it she tries one time-management strategy after another to 'get control of her schedule.'

I recently had a coaching encounter where a pastor shared about his ideal living situation. It struck me as curious that even though he had a family, he never mentioned his wife and kids when talking about his dream home. When I made that observation and asked what was behind it, he immediately responded, "I know where that comes from," and recounted a shame memory from when he was 12. Even though he *knew* something was out of whack, and *knew* what the root issue was, he kept up the daily battle to wrestle open his heart to the people around him, because it never occurred to him that his life could be fundamentally different.

### **Coaching Beyond Coping**

So how can you learn to coach people beyond the big tolerations? Here are three keys to the process that work with the little things, too:

1. **Facilitate Conscious Awareness**

We tolerate things because we don't realize they can change. And since we can't change them anyway, we walk around them every day (like I did with the fridge door) and try to ignore them. The first step in the process is simply becoming consciously aware of the fact what we are coping. As a coach, when you see a client passively sidestepping an issue, challenge it. Asking, "How much energy does it take for you to manage that pattern?" or "What if we worked on eliminating that all together instead of coping with it every day?" brings the fact that we are tolerating something back to our conscious awareness.

2. **Offer Hope**

Being aware that we are tolerating something is a downer—unless we have some hope that it can change. To encourage someone literally means to give them courage, and this kind of change is a place where we often need courage! Spend some time with the client exploring the idea that this can change. Believe that they can change. Take the person to an ideal future where this thorn in the side is totally gone. Hope provides the energy to face the giant.

3. **Deal with the Issue on its Own Level**

This is often where the process breaks down. If you have been deeply wounded by an important person in your life, the obstacle is in the emotional realm, so it is most effectively changed on an emotional level by using emotional tools. Healing, intimacy, encounters with Jesus or genuine words of belief in you—these are tools that touch your emotional self. By contrast, rational tools (like repeating scripture) tend to touch mostly your mind, while volitional tools (like gritting your teeth and deciding to be different) operate mainly on the will. Rational and volitional tools don't heal hurts! However, if the issue is that you took on an ungodly belief by an action of your will ("I'll never let anyone hurt me like that again"), the emotional healing will never be complete until you exercise your will and "undecide", too.

So what fears, insecurities, wrong beliefs or thorns in the side are you tolerating right now? Maybe it's time to think about what it would take to stop coping and start living.

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